

Dan Walters: Seawater could be an answer to drought in California

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A large-scale plant to convert seawater into potable water is under construction north of San Diego near Carlsbad.

The San Diego County Water Authority, for whom the plant is being built, is also studying the feasibility of a second desalination facility nearby on the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps training base.

Meanwhile, Poseidon Resources, which is constructing the Carlsbad plant, is closing in on regulatory permits for a clone at Huntington Beach, farther up the coast in Orange County.

Last week, a scientific panel gave a positive nod to the state Coastal Commission for Poseidon's plan to draw in seawater, which has been a sticking point in its permit application.

There was no particular reason why it should have been, other than that some folks in the environmental community reflexively oppose any project to increase California's water supply, even in the midst of a historic drought.

Poseidon's Carlsbad project faced similar hurdles, but then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration weighed in at the critical moment to move it along.

Would Gov. Jerry Brown do the same if his intervention is needed to make the Huntington Beach plant a reality? Or the Camp Pendleton plant?

His administration pays lip service to adding new supplies that would ease the impact of future droughts, but he's also tight with anti-development environmental groups.

San Diego's vigorous pursuit not only of desalinated water but other supplies, as well as aggressive conservation, are aimed at making it less dependent on water from Southern California's Metropolitan Water District, which in turn is highly dependent on water from Northern California via the California Aqueduct and its own aqueduct from the eastern slope of the Sierra.

However, as Southern California becomes less dependent on Northern California water, the rationale for the MWD's essential support of Brown's plan to build two water tunnels beneath the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta becomes ever-weaker.

San Diego, the MWD's largest single subagency, is openly opposed to the tunnels, saying they are not needed to make the region water-independent and will cost too much for the very marginal benefit they will bring.

Thus, in a roundabout way, were Brown to help bring additional desalination supplies on line, he would be undercutting the tunnel project, which he clearly sees as completing the State Water Project his father began and adding to his own political legacy.

Given the uncertainty of future water supplies from nature, via rain and snow, desalination has a welcome certitude, especially when powered by decarbonized electrical generation from sun and wind.

Yes, desalinated water is more expensive, but even at about \$2,000 an acre-foot – the price Poseidon will be charging its customers – it's scarcely a half-cent per gallon. And for arid Southern California, it makes a lot of sense – perhaps

more sense than spending billions of dollars on a couple of pipes that won't increase supply.